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ABSTRACT

The brief article, intended for use as thought provoking instructional material for secondary students, focuses on the concept of political legitimacy and how it relates to revolution. The objective is to help students recognize that to be legitimate is to have society's approval. For example, the government of each nation within its own political culture is considered legitimate when the public's attitude toward the nation is positive. The public holds attitudes toward the process of selecting officials, certain obligations which the government has to its populace, guarantee of rights, and provision of goods and services. Although sometimes failing to provide output expected by the populace, the government still exists because, in many cases, effective political socialization tends to keep a government legitimate during periods of crisis. In conclusion, to remain legitimate, a government needs to reflect the values of its people. Three discussion questions follow the article. (SJM)

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POLITICAL LEGITIMACY AND REVOLUTION

--Prior to having the students read this article, it is suggested that you have them discuss the terms legitimate and illegitimate. If we say that someone's business is legitimate, what do we mean? Why do we say that a child born out of wedlock is illegitimate? Try to get the students to go beyond the answer that the determining factors are laws. Encourage them to see that the real measure of whether or not something is legitimate is the attitude of the society toward it.

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The people of every nation have certain values or attitudes toward government. Each nation has its own political culture or customs. Included in this political culture are ideas about how men who govern are to be chosen and how they are to behave once they are in office. In the United States, we believe that most government officials should be elected by popular vote and that they should listen to the wishes of the majority once they are in office. The Soviets believe that their leaders should be chosen by the one political party they consider legal and that their leaders should follow the teachings of Marxist-Leninism.

If a government does not correspond to the attitudes and beliefs of its own people, then we may say that it is illegitimate. If government leaders come to power through a military coup, but the people of the country believe they should be chosen by popular elections, we may say that the government is illegitimate. Colonial governments may be considered illegitimate if they govern against the will of the native population. The Vietnamese did not consider the colonial government of France legitimate. In like manner many Americans of the 1770's believed the colonial government of England was illegitimate. The native populations did not believe that their government officials should be chosen by the colonial power.

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Only if the men in office are chosen in agreement with how people think they should be chosen may we say that their power is legitimate. It is important to understand that a government does not have to be a democracy to be legitimate. What is important is that the attitudes of the people about how men should get political power are in reality the way their government leaders came to power.

Not only do people have certain attitudes about how men should become their leaders, but they also have ideas about what kinds of things their governments should do for them. People naturally expect things from their government. Otherwise, why would we have them at all? The people may expect the government to take property from the wealthier and give it to them. We believe that we have certain rights that the government is to guarantee such as freedom of speech and of religion, the right to a free trial, and the right to equal treatment before the government.

There may be some basic rights that all men expect their governments to guarantee, but different political cultures may value some rights more than others. It would seem that a literate society would be more jealous of its freedom of press than an illiterate one. A society which has known religious persecution might support the right of freedom of religion more strongly than another society. However, a nation with a state religion might not tolerate the right of each citizen to choose his own religion.

If a government fails to guarantee certain rights that its people value, it will be viewed as an illegitimate one. To understand why revolutionaries view a government as

illegitimate, we must ask ourselves: What rights did the revolutionaries value? What rights did the government deny them? Revolutionary slogans often refer to denied rights. The American revolutionaries insisted on "No taxation with representation" while the French revolutionaries pleaded for "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity."

No only do we expect governments to guarantee certain rights, but we also expect them to provide us with goods and services we want. The people of a nation may expect its government to provide them with economic development, even though their governments are too weak to accomplish it. A government that cannot show it is effective in giving the people what they want will probably not last. Unless a government can "deliver the goods" then its legitimacy or its right to rule will probably be called into question.

Occasionally a government may not give the output which the people expect of it, but it continues to exist. Clearly the United States government during the depression did not always yield the output we expected of it. Today many object to the "output" of the Vietnam War, yet our government has not been denied its legitimacy or its right to rule by a majority of the people.

The reason for governments continuing to exist in spite of not providing the output desired is the strong affection of the people for their governmental institutions. This strong affection is the result of effective political socialization. Effective political socialization means that the people have been well indoctrinated to love and accept the government they have as a nation. Our educational system in the United States, as well as our family and public groups, have taught us that our constitution and our system of government should never be abandoned. This socialization or indoctrination has been so successful that even during times of crisis only a few will favor changing the institutions of government. The fact that the Chinese continued to support the government after the Great Leap Forward failed indicates that political socialization has taken place. Many other underdeveloped countries are not so fortunate. They lack educational systems to teach loyalty to the government, and many parents do not know enough about the government to teach their children to be loyal to it.

Political socialization will tend to make a government legitimate during periods of crisis unless basic norms and values are violated. If basic norms and values are violated political socialization will make the government seem more illegitimate. We have been so socialized to believe in the right of trial by jury that any government that denied it to us would be considered illegitimate. It is important for a government not to violate basic values during a period of crisis if it is to remain legitimate.

What happens to a government that does not reflect the values of its people, does not deliver the goods and services desired, and whose socialization process is not effective in keeping the governed loyal? Values and attitudes of people toward their governments are always changing. What happens if the government has not kept pace with the changes? An imbalance will result between the desires of the people and the government as it exists.

The government may attempt to correct imbalances like these by reforming so that it reflects the desires of the governed. If a government is successful in doing this, then it has promoted peaceful change. However, a government may not recognize the pressing need for reform until it is too late. Or the government leaders may simply refuse to change to meet the desires of the people and use the military and police force instead to stay in power. The French refused to change its colonial policy to match the

the desires of the Vietnamese it governed, in much the same way that the British refused to reform its policy to the satisfaction of the American colonists. The governments of Chiang Kai Shek in China and Batista in Cuba also refused to change their policies to satisfy the people who viewed them as illegitimate.

If a government refuses to change when it no longer reflects the values of its people and instead uses armed force to stay in power, then it will become even more illegitimate in the eyes of the people. The use of force by a government that does not have the consent of the governed can only make the people resent the government more. When a government reacts in such a manner, it should not be surprising that men rise in arms against it. One may ask what other choice do they have if they wish to abolish a government they think is illegitimate.

Suggested discussion questions:

1. Why do you think the radical left in the United States views the government as illegitimate? Has our socialization process failed?

2. Do you think that the United States government has tried to reform to satisfy these dissenters? How has it reformed or how has it refused to reform? Do you believe that if it relies on force to quell dissent that it will be successful?

3. What would the government have to do before you would consider it so illegitimate that you would risk your own life to overthrow it?

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